

Zinda Magazine, June 26, 2007

Chicago -- The House approved a foreign operations bill on June 22 with an amendment that would grant at least \$10 million to the Nineveh Plains' religious minorities.

The bill passed in the House by a 241 to 178 vote.

On June 12, the House Appropriations Committee approved the foreign operations bill by unanimous voice vote. Committee member Congressman Mark Kirk, Republican from Illinois, said he introduced the Nineveh Plains amendment to the bill.

The amendment states that the committee is "concerned about the plight of religious minorities in Iraq" and that these groups be entitled to "not less than \$10 million" to assist "religious minorities in the Nineveh Plains."

Kirk said he hopes the amendment will prevent the "de-Christianization" of Iraq, referring to the number of threatened Christians who have fled the country.

"The internal coalition of Iraq should not lead to the end of Christian communities in that country," Kirk said. "It would be ironic indeed if the involvement of the United States led to almost no Christians in Iraq. We have a chance to preserve the majority of the community there by taking this action. People shouldn't be forced to be refugees from their country if 600,000 Christians could remain in their country."

The amendment further directs \$8 million of that sum to "internally displaced families" and \$2 million to fund the growth of small businesses in the area.

The congressman said the committee defined internally displaced people as families who have

been forced to flee their homes in neighboring towns, including Basra, Mosul and Baghdad, to come to the Nineveh Plains.

Michael Youash, Director of the Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project, a D.C.-based policy institute, said Kirk consulted ISDP in defining an internally displaced minority as "someone who has left their home for another area, effectively becoming homeless but has not crossed any international boundaries."

Assyrian representatives said the Nineveh Plain is often the last resort for Christians before they leave Iraq, making it a critical location for aid and assistance.

"It's obviously frustrating because the American government is the largest provider of assistance to Iraq," Kirk said. "(Iraqi-Americans) ask the question, 'Well, why can't my government that works for me make sure that my relatives in Iraq are safer?' And we want all Iraqis to be safe, but with regard to some of the minorities who have been ignored."

Kirk said the dollar amount was determined by the estimated budgets of a series of projects, including the costs of recruiting and creating a police force made up of the area's religious minorities. The projects also include food for needy families, generating jobs and income, and development of infrastructure in the region.

"It's a pretty crucial step," Kirk said. "We had a unanimous feeling among Democrats and Republicans that we should move forward on this, and a feeling that Congress needed to take action. The executive branch and assistance officials in Iraq had not focused enough on assistance projects for minorities in general, and for Christian communities in particular in the Nineveh Plains."

A six-month-old coalition called the Chaldean Assyrian Syriac Council of America backed the resolution. The partnership comprised the Assyrian American National Federation, the Chaldean Federation of America, the Chaldean American Chamber of Commerce and the Assyrian National Council of Illinois.

CASCA officials said their Detroit members also communicated with Appropriations Committee member Rep. Joe Knollenberg, R-Mich.

Knollenberg was one of nearly 200 congressmen who co-sponsored a bill this year that would recognize the Armenian Genocide of 1.5 million. The Committee on Foreign Affairs is scheduled to review the measure. But the Armenian Genocide bill does not mention Assyrians. The Holland-based Seyfo Center, which researches Assyrian genocide, estimates that 500,000 Assyrians were killed in the 1915 genocide by the Ottoman Empire.

The \$10 million amendment does not mention specific ethnic groups, but Kirk said the historic Christian communities in the region are a particular focus.

But there is concern about how the money, once allocated, will reach the appropriate minority groups. "The language is very specific. That is at least some kind of safeguard," CASCA representative Jackie Bejan said. "The designation of (minorities) really means non-Muslims ... We have to make sure that the guarantors -- whether it's USAID or some other sub-guarantors -- that we have some direct involvement in an advisory capacity to make sure some of our own (Non-Government Organizations) get involved."

Bejan said some of those organizations that can assist in ensuring the money is properly allocated include the Assyrian Aid Society, Babylon Charity and "institutions that have a proven track record."

"We have to make an effort to lobby to make sure some of this money actually will get delivered to an NGO," she said.

But before the \$10 million is granted, the bill must be approved by the Senate, as well.

In 2005, Rep. Anna Eshoo, Democrat from California, introduced an amendment addressing Assyrians to a foreign relations bill. Her amendment called for federal departments to recognize Assyrians, Chaldeans and all indigenous Iraqi Christians. While the bill did pass in the House, it died from inaction in the Senate at the close of the last congressional session.

Kirk said he had worked with the United States assistance authority on a Nineveh Plains proposal more than a year ago, but saw no action.

The directive came in the wake of President George Bush's June 9 visit with Pope Benedict XVI in which the pontiff expressed concern for Iraqi Christians.

"He did express deep concern about the Christians inside Iraq," Bush said at a press conference in Rome, "that he was concerned that the society that was evolving would not tolerate the Christian religion."

Bush said the pope expressed worry about "the Christians inside Iraq being mistreated by the Muslim majority. He's deeply concerned about that."

Youash said he visited the Nineveh Plains in recent years and conducted field missions to the area.

"It stretches from the ancient city of Nineveh in Mosul for miles and miles, and it's crested by mountains," Youash said. "It's absolutely beautiful and absolutely peaceful. However, it is absolutely impoverished. It lacks infrastructure. It lacks development. It's neglected ... under Saddam and it's neglected today. Deliberately neglected."

Youash said he interviewed Assyrian Iraqi refugees in March to gain insight into policies needed to prevent further Christian emigration from Iraq.

"The Nineveh Plains are saturated, dilapidated and destitute," he said. "They are a leaping ground into Jordan, Syria and Lebanon ... We can keep so many people from having to make that leap."

